The Fourth Church Pulpit

IN THE BEGINNING . . . GOD

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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture : Matthew 28:16-20, Genesis 1:1-13

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void. . . ."
Genesis 1:1 (NRSV)

Sooner or later every child teaches his or her parents the fundamental dilemma of theology. It was Paul Tillich, I believe, who said that three-year-olds are all theologians, that they think ontologically about the very basic nature of being and non-being, that is to say. And certainly over the years the little people of Charles Schulz's "Peanuts" cartoon have, with regularity, talked about and discussed the great philosophic and theological questions of our generation.

In any event, this is how the teaching moment sounds:

"Mommy or Daddy, who made trees?" The unsuspecting parent always answers, "Why, God made the trees, honey."

Next question, "Who made the sun?" Again, with admirable and consistent logic, the parent responds, "God made the sun."

"Mommy, who made the sky?" And the poor mother, innocent of the fact that this simple little progression is headed for a disaster, a head-on collision with the biggest question of all, responds, "God made the sky."

The child ponders: "It was God who made trees, sun and sky": and then administers the intellectual coup de grace. "Daddy, who made God?"

There are several alternatives. If you are a traditional nuclear family you can say something like, "You know, I'm not sure, you better ask your mother about that." Or, you can say, "That's such a great question, why don't you ask your Sunday School teacher next Sunday?" "Why don't we go for an ice cream cone?" will work sometimes.

The best answer, of course . . . "Who made God?" "Nobody" would probably be effective except by now the parent, into the philosophic dilemma, so stammers something like, "Nobody made God. God always was. God always is. Nobody had to make God. God has always been." Now the child is skeptical. This doesn't make sense.

Sooner or later we learn the basic philosophic dilemma. We are reasonable creatures but our most basic questions about ourselves, our hope . . . the human condition, lie outside the boundaries of our reason. Sooner or later we confront the elemental dilemma. We are finite and we have a devilishly difficult time getting our finite minds around the notion of the infinite. Sooner or later, if we think about it, and I am convinced that we all do sooner or later, we learn the enormity of the assertion we are making when we speak the three letter word "God."

The first academic theologian I ever heard was an Englishman, J. S. Whale. I was so enthralled with his lectures, I ran out and bought his book entitled *Christian Doctrine*. At the beginning Whale told the story of a young Anglican priest who asked the Bishop at Oxford for advice on preaching. The distinguished churchman thought for a minute and said: "Preach about God and preach about twenty minutes," both of which gives us a bit of trouble. Whale elaborated: "The Christian preacher has many opportunities but one theme . . . the reality, nature and purpose of the living God." [p. 11]

Years before, John Ruskin wrote: "The duty of the clergy is to remind people, in an eloquent manner, of the existence of God." [John Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God*, p. 240] Advice echoed by my favorite caveat: Chicagoan, Don Benedict once said that the job of the urban church is to keep alive the rumor that there is a God.

The Bible never makes an argument for the existence of God. But it does in its very first sentence make the most staggering affirmation. "In the beginning . . . God. . . ." And the ink is barely dry before the arguing starts. Leonard Sweet says,

> "The creation story has been variously identified as history, science, myth, theology and cult liturgy . . . 'creationists' war against 'evolutionists,' 'creation science' rams into archeological research and biblical literalists hold out against historical - critical scholars." [*Homiletics*, April–June, 1993]

Legitimate scholars argue with one another about the translation of the first verb in the Bible. Should it read, "In the beginning, God created" or "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth," or is it, as some argue, "At the beginning of God's creating . . ." that is, are we talking, not about a one time event, but a process which is still going on?

And that's only the start of it. Beneath the text and the assertion itself there seems to be a far bigger conflict between religion and science, or if you will, faith and reason. Beginning with the revolution started by the publication in 1859 of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of the Species*, there has been an assumption, widely accepted on all sides, that religion and science are in conflict; that the theories of science threaten religious truth; and the discoveries of science have the power to disprove religion. Darwin himself would be surprised. He didn't think his ideas about evolution threatened religion. He knew that his theory challenged the timing at least of the biblical creation story, but some of his best biographers think he remained a believer in God all his life, continued to participate in the life of his local parish, and he is buried in Westminster Abbey, just a few feet from Isaac Newton.

What happened, and tragically still happens, is that believers react strongly to the perceived threat from science and try to make scripture into something it is not, namely history of biology, a sad story which includes the Scope's Monkey Trial and the ongoing and occasionally successful efforts of creationists to rewrite biology textbooks. Religionists retreat and hide behind texts which they now claim are historically verifiable accounts of how things happened. . . . And scientists retreat from what they perceive as intentional ignorance as quickly as they can.

It was Albert Einstein, however, who out of his own deep sense of reverence, said:

> "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind."

In the meantime, things have become very interesting on the religion/science frontier. Very few theologians and scientists are attacking one another today. Rather, with astonishing frequency, they are talking with one another. Leonard Sweet notes that while for most of the 20th century scientists and religionists have been throwing rocks at one another, the "approaching 21st century finds everyone occupying surprisingly common ground."

On our side of it we are recovering one of our most precious traditions which goes all the way back to the 2nd century — namely, faith seeking understanding, the notion that the human mind is capable of working its way toward ultimate truth; that even if we will not know all mysteries in this life, the search, the seeking, the rational, scientific pursuit of knowledge, understanding, truth, is itself an act of faith, a holy enterprise.

And on the other side, there is an amazing new openness to the notion that there is mystery, there is far more to truth than a laboratory or mathematical formula can contain; that the first quality of good science is openness and the willingness to revise what we think we know. Curiously, it has to do with two scientific events — the work of Albert Einstein and the discoveries of the astronomer, Hubble, which revolutionized the way science looks at the world and proved two ideas. One — the universe is not static, but is expanding outward, at the speed of light; and two — there was a beginning.

Professor of Mathematical Physics, Paul Davies, published a book last year, *The Mind of God,* in which he writes:

> "Through my scientific work, I have come to believe more and more strongly that the physical universe is put together with an ingenuity so astonishing that I cannot accept it merely as a brute fact. There must be, it seems to me, a deeper level of explanation. Whether one wishes to call that deeper level 'God' is a matter of semantics. . . ."

A conclusion you might share if, on your way out of here this morning, you will stop for a few seconds and look carefully at one of the irises blooming in the Garth - astonishing ingenuity!

And Professor Davies moves the theological dilemma squarely into the arena of logic, science, when he says:

> "It takes more of a leap of faith to believe in a universe without purpose then in one with a purpose." [See *The Living Pulpit,* April-June, 1993]

This vignette has been attributed to several scientists including Einstein:

> "To think that creation resulted by accident is like thinking that *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* resulted from an explosion in the print shop."

From the religion side of it, Hans Kung wrote a masterful book a while ago and titled it simply, *Does God Exist?* In it he argues that faith and reason are not opposites . . . reasonable people have faith, and faithful people are called to use their reason, intellects. . . . But Kung warns believers against the temptation to try to prove God's existence scientifically. If theology depends on science, Professor Kung argues, "God will die a death of a thousand qualifications." [p. 630] His real tour de force, however, is in turning atheism's arguments, represented by Freud, Marx, et. al., into a critique of atheism itself. Sounding very much like the mathematician-physicist, Kung wrote, "Atheism, too, lives by an undemonstrated faith." [p. 329]

So we have some common ground and some good conversations and old enemies don't seem to be enemies at all, and there is a sense in which the environmental crisis has forced on us the necessity of listening to one another and working hard to counteract what the *New York Times* last Sunday described as humanity's suicidal march toward extinction. It's going to take all of us — scientists, theologians, politicians — working hard together to reverse what science knows is the suicidal exploitation of our world and atmosphere. Parenthetically, even some of our old images bear reconsideration. Everybody knows that the cosmology of the Bible has nothing to do with reality: flat earth, covered by a dome called a sky or firmament. Laughable science! But now we know that there is a dome up there, absolutely vital to our existence. It doesn't exactly hold the water out as Genesis says but it does hold deadly radiation out and our precious atmosphere in. We call it our ozone layer; the thickness of an apple skin and it is absolutely necessary for our life.

In the beginning . . . God, a theological assertion written some time in the 6th century B.C. — not to answer people's scientific inquiries. The creation story in Genesis is not a response to the academic question, "What happened at the beginning?" but rather a strong answer to a far more pressing question, "What is the meaning of the mess we are in?" It was written for the people of Israel living in exile in Babylon. Their captivity in an alien place meant the end, they thought. This kind of thing was not supposed to happen to the people of a sovereign loving God. Genesis 1, says Walter Bruegemann, is written to address the urgent problem of "finding a ground for faith in God when experience seems to deny the rule of God."

So this precious story is not science: it's pastoral care — it's about faith and hope in a situation which seems empty of meaning and hope. And it doesn't take much creativity to recognize the relevance of that.

Rollo May has written:

> "The chief problem of people in the (middle decades of the) twentieth century is emptiness." ["Man's Search for Himself" in Kung, p. 324]

A new and important book by Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers,* examines the religious practice and spirituality of the Baby Boomers. "Seekers" he calls them, not joiners, not believers, not belongers, a generation on a quest. Not at all atheist - only 1%, or even agnostic - 4%, but people adrift, looking, searching. He describes one of the persons he interviewed as fairly typical: a woman who went from drugs and love-ins in the 60s to macrobiotics, Zen Buddhism and Native American rituals, built a sweat lodge in her back yard, and speaks of "being into Quakers a lot these days." [*New York Times,* May 30, 1993]

Roof and others who look at us — our values and behavior, our economics and politics — detect a people who are empty, searching for meaning and hope . . . for something to believe in and trust and give life to.

The real theological problem with consumerism — the idolatry of stuff, the drive to acquire, buy, own — is that it is a religious quest, a god to whom we bow and for whom we live.

And beyond our culture the political scientists and philosophers are clear that the real failure of Marxism is not merely economic and political but theological, moral, spiritual. Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote prophetically a decade ago:

> "If I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous revolution that swallowed up some 60 million of our people I could not put it more accurately than to repeat, '. . . (men) we have forgotten God.'"

Genesis 1 was written to comfort and encourage people who did not see much reason for faith in God and hope in the future. Who doesn't know a little bit about that on a deeply personal level?

There are times for each and all of us when it does not feel like our lives are being guided by a benevolent power. There are plenty of occasions when it feels as if our lives are cut loose from any solid mooring, drifting, without goal or purpose. There are times when the innocent suffering of the children strikes deeply in our hearts. And there are, or will be times of deep personal loss when someone we love dies, or a relationship ends, or we find ourselves unemployed, or the child care center up and leaves; and overwhelmed with grief, you and I know exactly what it means to be in exile, alone, cut off. . . .

And then we need, not a biology lesson, not a mathematical proof, but a hand to hold, a shoulder to lean on, a strong arm to hold us up.

The existence of God cannot be proved, nor disproved. Religion and science, faith and reason are not contradictory. What, then, can we know? What can we do? We can listen to what others have known from their experience. We can be open to the marvel and mystery of this wonderful creation, this astonishing ingenuity. And we can hold tightly and cherish holy moments, moments shimmering with God's presence. . . .

Moments when love is given and received.

Moments when forgiveness is extended and accepted.

Moments of passion and beauty and joy.

Moments of birth, and moments of death, where even in the valley of the shadow we know God's presence. Moments when in memory and hope and love bread is broken and a cup shared.

"In the beginning . . . God." In the end . . . God. Forever and ever.

Amen.